

MEETING NOTES (FINAL)

HABITAT CONSERVATION PLANS (HCPs) Multi-jurisdictional discussion and City of Tucson Technical Advisory Committee meeting Wednesday, September 16, 2009, 9:00 – 1:00 p.m. Pima County Natural Resources Parks and Recreation 3500 W. River Road.

ATTENDEES

City of Tucson (COT) Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) members present:

Dennis Abbate (Arizona Game and Fish Department)
Marit Alanen (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)
Rich Glinski (Arizona Game and Fish Department – *retired*)
Paul Green (Tucson Audubon Society)
Trevor Hare (Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection)
Ries Lindley (City of Tucson, Tucson Water Department)
Guy McPherson (University of Arizona, School of Natural Resources – *Emeritus*)
E. Linwood Smith (EPG, Inc.)

Other Attendees, including *ex-officio* TAC members, present:

Mitch Basefsky (Central Arizona Project)
Jamie Brown (City of Tucson)
Jennifer Christelman (Town of Marana)
Neva Connolly (Pima County)
Locana de Souza (Arizona Game and Fish Department)
David Godlewski (Southern Arizona Home Builders Association)
Colby Henley (RECON)
David Jacobs (Arizona State Land Department / Arizona Attorney General's Office)
Leslie Liberti (City of Tucson)
Joy Lyndes (Sage Landscape, Architecture, and Environmental)
Brian Powell (Pima County)
Scott Richardson (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)
Sherry Ruther (Pima County)
Beth Scott (Drachman Institute, University of Arizona)
Geoff Soroka (SWCA)
Janine Spencer (Town of Marana)
Jim Tress (Westland Resources, Inc.)
Vince Vasquez (Diamond Ventures)

1. Multi-jurisdictional meeting regarding wildlife-beneficial structures and possible HCP mitigation credit

[Notes from this portion of the meeting are excerpted from the Town of Marana draft Technical Biology Team (TBT) minutes:]

The US Fish and Wildlife Service, Town of Marana TBT, City of Tucson TAC, and Pima County STAT members held a combined meeting beginning at 9:00 am and lasting until about noon.

The following examples of structures that have greater value to wildlife than the size of their footprint were suggested: the proposed Avra Valley/I-10 and Oracle Rd. wildlife crossings, burrowing owl management areas with artificial structures and monitoring, research (like the combined research project proposed by Tucson and Marana for the Tucson shovel-nosed snake), providing habitat for pollinator species, habitat restoration projects, bat gates, and stock tanks.

The effectiveness of the structures or on-the-ground projects arising from research was suggested as one key to assigning mitigation credit, although concerns were expressed that jurisdictions are unlikely to want to commit to expensive projects without some up-front assurance of credit for their efforts. It was also suggested that how well lands are protected adjoining a wildlife crossing should be considered for credit. The “mitigation sandwich” of acquisition, management, monitoring, and preserving in perpetuity is important to receive full credit for a mitigation site. Evaluation the threat to a species should also be considered in assigning mitigation credit for a conservation measure.

Brian Powell, Pima County, proposed a step guide in determining credits: (1) are there covered species and associated habitat in the area or nearby, (2) what are the threats to the species that are being mitigated, (3) outline how proposed conservation actions address the threats, (4) provide alternatives and analyze for likelihood of effectiveness, (5) an oversight group will evaluate the conservation measures, (6) implement monitoring and adaptive management.

A distinction was made between conservation measures that are good for all wildlife in general versus measures that are beneficial to species covered by HCPs and are therefore eligible for mitigation credit.”

2. TAC-only discussion of utility scale solar and burrowing owl mitigation

Leslie said that the City was approached by a solar developer regarding interest in the 300-plus acre City of Tucson “Chu Farm” in Avra Valley for a large scale photovoltaic installation. The following bullets represent highlights from discussion with TAC members:

- Effect of solar projects, such as what Leslie described, would likely not preserve any burrowing owl habitat on the site. That is, the entire site would be impacted.

- Solar infrastructure would likely create perches for burrowing owl predators. Therefore, trying to create or maintain any burrowing owl habitat along the fringes may be counterproductive.
- Since the Avra Valley HCP is not yet finalized and approved, TAC members were open to funding options for burrowing owl mitigation (i.e., funding contributions to establish a Burrowing Owl Management Area (BOMA)).
- Given reasons discussed at previous TAC meetings (e.g., proximity to the Santa Cruz River, proximity to Tucson Audubon Society's ongoing habitat restoration activities, etc.), City staff recommend that BOMAs be located on the City's northernmost Avra Valley properties of Hurst, Simpson, or Santa Cruz Farm, etc.
- Although 30 acres is listed as the recommended minimum BOMA size in the Burrowing Owl Working Group's Burrowing Owl Guidelines for Municipalities and has been described in the City's Preliminary Draft Avra Valley HCP, some TAC members expressed discomfort with this size. It was suggested that 100 acres may be a better standard as this reflects recommendations made to the TAC by Greg Clark of Wild at Heart (See HCP TAC meeting minutes from 2-20-08 at www.tucsonaz.gov/ocsd/docs/CMS1_033083.pdf)
- Given that there is 5,167 acres of potential habitat in the Avra Valley HCP planning area as defined by the 2006 AGFD burrowing owl survey report, it was suggested that a ratio of 0.1:1 would better mitigate impacts. Thus, if this ratio is to be used, 517 acres must be set-aside if 5,167 acres of habitat are impacted.
- The Preliminary draft Avra Valley HCP describes establishing up to four BOMAs. At the mitigation ratio recommended above, four, 130-acre BOMAs would be needed if maximum impact were to occur. Alternatively, five, 104-acre BOMAs could be established.
- A 130-acre BOMA would mitigate for up to 1,300 acres of impact while a 104-acre BOMA would mitigate for up to 1040 acres of impact.
- The Preliminary draft Avra Valley HCP requires that a BOMA be established if any impact to burrowing owl habitat is planned to occur (i.e., for a specific project).
- There is concern about installing artificial burrows for nesting on lands already considered habitat. Perhaps instead of installing artificial burrows in areas with existing, natural burrows, the lands could be set-aside per the ratio above.
- Rich suggested that a satellite BOMA be established elsewhere in the HCP planning area.
- TAC members are open to funding a mitigation or conservation bank that would be used to establish, maintain, and monitor these BOMAs.

Questions to consider:

- What cultural resource constraints are there?
- Is it possible to create a GIS layer of solar development potential of all City-owned lands and then compare that with the merged Covered Species modeled habitat GIS file?
- Does Tucson Audubon Society have any plans for vegetation restoration on these properties that may conflict with BOMA recommendations?

3. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 1:10 p.m.